

Serving Meat and Potatoes into the 21st Century: Fixing the Problem of the Marine Corps'
Internal Information News Program

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Internal Information News Program

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to
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Hope has long been a course of action relied upon by many Marine Corps public affairs officers (PAO) responsible for providing news and information to their local audiences via command newspapers. Base and station PAOs work diligently with their correspondents and editors to ensure their local commander's message is placed in the right spot, in the right edition, and at the right time to reach specific audiences; however, once the paper hits the street, it is often anyone's guess as to whether or not the message was received and understood. Basically, PAOs just hope their limited audience picks up a copy of the paper, reads the commander's message and spreads the news. Marine Corps produced newspapers alone cannot meet the information needs of their intended audience; therefore, reorganizing and refocusing certain public affairs resources must be done in order to effectively serve Marines, family members, civilian employees and associated audiences.

BACKGROUND

During any given week, an average of 50 to 90 percent of a PAO's staff is dedicated to the production of a command's newspaper, which leaves little time or manpower to accomplish routine, comprehensive and well-executed multimedia information blitzes. To address such structure issues, inefficiencies and much more, Headquarters Marine Corps public affairs leaders

commissioned the *U.S. Marine Corps Public Affairs Study*.¹ The results and recommendations were published in 2003. While the MOS is rapidly addressing manpower and equipment requirements associated with the current operational environment, no clear and concise solution has emerged with regard to the finding of the study -- specifically, the MOS' inability to routinely provide easily accessible, comprehensive and timely information to Marines, their family members and other audiences.

READERSHIP

Public Affairs Officers often refer to their local paper in one of two ways: the best paper in the Marine Corps, or a much sought after pet-cage liner. Both statements are usually the result of dubious empirical data. Across the nation, newspaper readership is on the decline. Adults ages 18 to 24 comprise only 8.3 and 9.7 percent of daily and Sunday newspaper readership, respectively.² That very same age bracket constitutes approximately 67 percent of the Corps' active duty enlisted strength and nearly 10 percent of its officers.³

¹ Booz/Allen/Hamilton, *U.S. Marine Corps Public Affairs Study*, vol. I, February 2003, 1.

² "Daily and Sunday Newspapers 2005 Readers Per Copy." *Newspaper Association of America Online*, 2005. <www.naa.org> (28 November 2005).

³ U.S. Marine Corps, *Concepts and Programs 2005* (Washington, D.C.: USMC Programs and Resources Department, 2005), 237, 232.

SATISFACTION

While more than 50 percent of the participants in the Marine Corps' public affairs study stated they pick up a copy of their command's newspaper weekly, 30 percent said the information was not timely, and 28 percent noted it was a lot of work to find the news they sought. The study further reported 39 percent of the readers polled were somewhat satisfied with Marine Corps news and information; the next highest level of satisfaction was 31 percent as neutral. Thirteen percent were dissatisfied.⁴

MARINE NEWS SOURCES AND AUDIENCE PREFERENCES

While the data provided by the study doesn't deliver a death blow to command newspapers, it does reveal that most readers would prefer to receive news in a more timely manner, such as via email and internet websites.⁵ The Marine Corps Public Affairs Study reveals that its audience is receiving their news from a number of sources, some of which are commercially run and provide insight into how the Marine Corps might better serve its audiences' information needs. The survey data was most revealing in the audiences' perceptions of installation papers' effectiveness with regard to two basic categories: Marine Corps-wide news, and installation-specific information. In the

⁴ Booz, vol. II, D-3.

⁵ Booz, vol. I, 9.

category of Marine Corps-wide news installation papers ranked seventh. In the category of the installation-specific information they ranked third. The *Marine Corps Times* came in third for effectiveness in delivering Marine Corps-wide news.⁶ What topped the charts for effectiveness in both categories was "other."

THE AMBIGUOUS "OTHER" -- A WINDOW OF OPPORTUNITY

"Other" ran the gamut of the Early Bird to memos, bulletins and the plan of the week; however, nearly 50 percent of the "other" responses referenced some type of verbal communication, such as staff meetings or formations. Since most Marine and civilian leaders have email at work, public affairs offices should send email news updates daily or weekly. The recipient (an office head or unit leader) could forward news updates to subordinates or relate relevant information during staff meetings or formations. Some commands send out email updates, but not all.

ONE STEP FURTHER -- ADDRESSING SPECIFIC NEEDS

The Marine Corps should establish an on-demand email news subscription service. Using as filters the types of information noted as most desirable by study group participants (such as basic Marine Corps news, educational opportunities, stories about a particular unit, benefits information and Single Marine Program news), each Marine or civilian employee with an email account

⁶Booz, vol. II, D-7.

could register (as can be done to receive Google News Alerts or the New York Times daily headlines) with Marine Corps News and/or their local installation's internet site to receive daily or weekly news updates.⁷ Users could simply select the types of news they're interested in receiving regularly and this would address the timeliness issue noted as an obstacle during the study. No longer would they have to wait for the next publication of the command's paper to access the latest news.

WHAT'S THE DELAY

Currently, the public affairs field does not receive MOS schoolhouse training for internet site development and management. Additionally, most commands lack actual webmaster billets. Usually serving as a command's webmaster is a collateral duty. The Marine learns to be a webmaster on the job or through local, civilian-administered computer classes -- not ideal methods for ensuring consistency from one command to the next.

THE MARINE CORPS TIMES EXAMPLE

One might ask why a civilian run newspaper was rated third in effectiveness with regard to delivering Marine Corps-wide news and installation papers came in seventh ("other" and the official website of the Marine Corps came in first and second,

⁷ Booz, vol. I, 7.

respectively).⁸ Each week the *Marine Corps Times* publishes and distributes to its worldwide audience a comprehensive review of the latest Marine Corps news. The *Marine Corps Times* also provides readers with previews of future publications and delivers relevant and timely special editions, on such topics as salaries, promotions and retention. This civilian generated news product fills an information void and can serve as an example for how the Corps should be doing business.

FRICITION

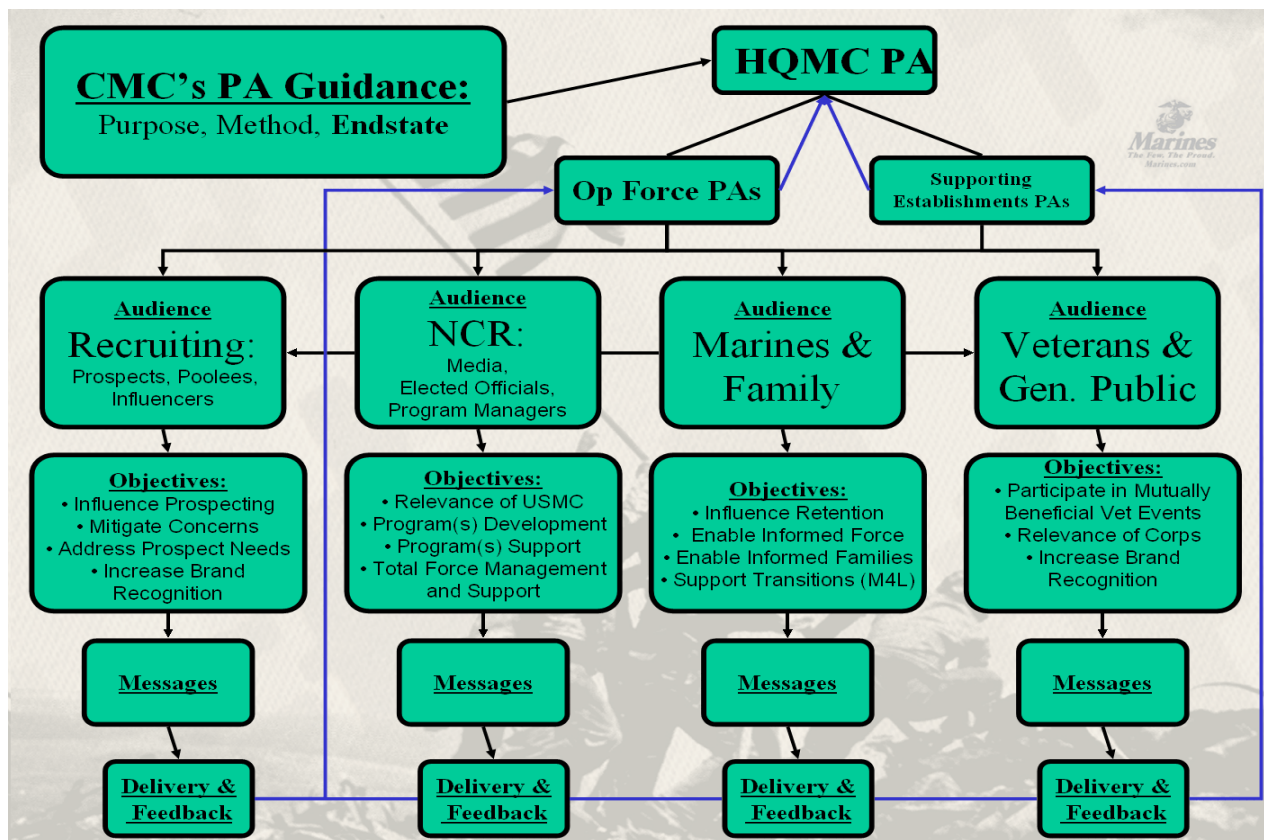
While some commanders might be willing to discontinue publishing their local newspapers in exchange for an all-encompassing Marine Corps produced weekly newspaper or magazine, others might not for many practical reasons. Local commercial enterprise newspapers cost the Marine Corps nothing but manhours to produce. These newspapers provide Marines a direct link to their local community through commercial advertisements, area event announcements and mutually beneficial business relationships. A command's internal information product is also a community relations tool. That said, its primary mission is to provide timely, comprehensive and relevant command information. While that element of work will still be accomplished by local public affairs Marines, the redundant requirement to localize Marine Corps-wide news can be reduced or eliminated, which will

⁸Booz, vol. II, D-7.

increase the amount of time and effort available to pursue local installation-specific news initiatives. Marine Corps-wide news could be provided to local audiences in the form of an insert that is the result of a coordinated effort.

A COORDINATED EFFORT

Just like The *Marine Corps Times* or any other major national/international news agency, the Marine Corps needs to have a central bureau with the authority to task PA operations globally with the production of news items that support a current Marine Corps public affairs communication strategy. See figure



below:

A central bureau and strategy would provide focus to the Marine Corps news gathering process, ensuring the big picture is comprehensive, up-to-date and delivered to all Marines weekly. This can be done much like *Parade Magazine* is inserted into newspapers across the nation each week. The insert has a circulation of 34,500,000 and is distributed by 340-plus Sunday newspapers, such as *The Washington Post*, *Boston Globe* and *The Miami Herald*.⁹ By copying this model, Marine Corps public affairs could publish and distribute a weekly Marine Corps-wide news insert for all its command newspapers. That would relieve each newspaper staff of the requirement to localize news stories with Corps-wide interest, such topics would be assigned to one paper staff and shared by all via the weekly insert. The reduced workload at some installations could provide the new manpower required to operate a central bureau; furthermore, the endstate will be a better served audience and a more connected military occupational field.

CONCLUSION

The Marine Corps and its public affairs field have an obligation to meet the news and information needs of their target audiences. The public affairs study published in 2003 clearly articulates their audiences' shift in news gathering preferences.

⁹ "General Facts on Parade," *Parade Online*, 2005, <<http://www.parade.com/mediarelations/index.html>> (15 December 2005)

They want timely, comprehensive and customized news products. Newspapers nationwide have recognized the need to adapt and offer new choices in order to maintain old customers and attract new patrons. Unfortunately a tired main entree of plain old meat and potatoes is still the weekly special being served to today's Marine Corps-wide news consumers. The public affairs study and this paper propose some alternatives and it's clear that without change the Marine audiences' information needs will not be met by installation newspapers alone.

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